

ADVENT II; YEAR A Canon Ian Barlow 5th December, 2010

"In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matt.3:l)

At first sight it might seem a little odd that the Gospel readings appointed for the second and third Sundays of Advent concentrate on John the Baptist and his message of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of heaven. After all, Advent is a Season of preparation for the celebration of the Incarnation, the birth of the Saviour. Or so we are accustomed to think. John the Baptist does not point towards the Nativity, but rather to the whole ministry, life, and death of Jesus: "He who is coming after me is mightier than I he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." And later: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." John comes proclaiming the close proximity of God's reign.

There seems to be some doubt whether the original Greek word means "draws near" or "has arrived". It is a bit academic and doesn't really matter, compared with the urgency of John's demand for readiness for the impending appearance of the Messiah, the Christ. He calls for a turn-about, an about-face, from the thoughtless, self-seeking way of life, in those who responded to his preaching. Each of the four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - who all knew the sequel to the proclamation of course - saw the call of John the Baptist as fulfilling the role of the fore-runner of the Messiah, spoken of many years earlier by the Prophet Isaiah: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight." It is interesting to note that while so many sects and study groups insist on a literal acceptance of every word of Holy Scripture, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each took Isaiah's prophecy and rearranged the words to suit their setting-out of the role of John the Baptist. For Isaiah 40 verse 3 says: "A voice cries out: Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord! Clear the way in the desert for our God!" Which is somewhat different from: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord." They mean much the same. John came from the wilderness of Judea with his call to prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness of the hearts and lives of those who looked for the Messiah. It is Justas applicable now as then.

The Old Testament contains great prophecies about the Messiah. They picture the ideal king, who is to be a descendant of King David. David's reign was looked back on as the golden era – he was the great king who ruled a mighty nation. He was the one who united the tribes of Israel, and conquered their enemies, and created a peaceful existence. No doubt the passing of time and the tragedies of the division of the kingdom into two warring factions, and being subsequently conquered and exiled by other nations, lent a glow of perfection to memory and legend. Each succeeding generation hoped that another David would arise to restore the idyllic kingdom. Such a king would be endowed with charismatic gifts by the Holy Spirit: powers of intellect, practical ability, and piety. And the suggestion is that then the world would become another Garden of Eden: "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." So wrote Isaiah. (11:9)

But that king never arose; the ideal was never realized, and gradually the prophecy was shelved and became part of the messianic hope. Christian faith naturally found its fulfillment in the coming of Jesus, and that is the sense in which we read it and hear it today.

The Old Testament could only be a volume of hopes and promises. It is incomplete, and can only point forward to an event hoped for with a greater or lesser degree of confidence: that is, the coming of the Kingdom of God. Christians believe that the event towards which the Old Testament points has, at least in principle, already occurred with the coming of Jesus Christ. The Jews, in their non-acceptance of Jesus as Messiah, continue to believe that the event has not yet taken place.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome about the scriptures and the things written in former days being for their instruction, he was referring to what we know as the Old Testament, for of course then there was no New Testament. Paul could not know that he was in fact taking part in producing what would later become the New Testament. So when he prays in his letter to the Roman Christians that "by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope," Paul is referring to the hope, promise, and expectation of the Old Testament, which he knows has been fulfilled in Jesus. "For I tell you," he wrote, "that Christ became a servant to the circumcised – i.e., the Jews - to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs." (15:8) God's fidelity to his own promises. But God went further than that, says Paul: "and in order that the Gentiles – i.e., the non-Jews - might glorify God for his mercy.

However, the Christian belief that the promises of the Old Testament have already been fulfilled in principle, does not mean that there is no further room or need for hope. Paul is saying that the Old Testament scriptures were written in order that the Christians may still have hope. When the Christian belief that God has fulfilled his promise in the sending of his Son Jesus Christ is established, it also raises the hope and expectation of the Second Coming of Christ, also long promised. So the Christian still looks to an unfulfilled future. The first stage of prophecy has been reached in the Incarnation. The fulfilled hope in that encourages us to look with confidence to the next and final stage, expressed in the Creed as: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

When the New Testament writers speak about the Incarnation, they tend to think of it in wider terms than merely stories of the angels and the shepherds; the stable the star and the Wise Men. The Incarnation to is the whole event of the coming of the Son of God into his world as Man, and includes not only his nativity, but his whole ministry, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension. In fact, apart from the actual birth and infancy stories of Matthew and Luke, there is little if any mention of the Nativity as such in the New Testament.

So when the Advent Season calls us to prepare for the coming of Jesus into the world, it is not just to prepare to celebrate his birthday, nor even to prepare for his Second Coming - although both are part of it of course. Rather we are called to prepare for his total coming into our lives, that we may be his, totally. "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Christ is always at hand, waiting and wanting to draw us into his kingdom of love and joyful service. Only as we turn from our self-centredness and turn to Christ can we know the satisfaction of the hope spoken of in the Scriptures. **Amen**

ADVENT III, Year A Responsibility: Canon Barlow 12 Dec.,2010

[Based on the Gospel for today viz. Matthew 11:2-11]

"When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him: Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (11:2 & 3)

John the Baptist had been imprisoned by King Herod because he had spoken bluntly about the king's scandalous and improper marriage to Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. This Herod by the way was the son of the Herod from whose jealousy Joseph and Mary fled with the infant Christ; the Herod whom the Wise Men visited before finding the stable at Bethlehem, and who ordered the slaughter of the Holy Innocents. Son Herod was an equally unpleasant chap. He had persuaded Herodias to leave his brother Philip and marry him, quite illegally. The hatred John's plain speaking had aroused in Queen Herodias caused her shortly afterwards to demand his execution - you no doubt remember the infamous story of Salome's dance and her subsequent demand for John's head on a platter. She'd been put up to it of course by her mother - who was obviously an ideal mate for Herod! That's the historical background.

But isn't it sad that John should feel compelled to send to ask Jesus if He really was the Christ or not? Surely John of all people should have been quite sure that Jesus was the Messiah! The coming of the Messiah had been the central theme of his preaching. No doubt this had filled his thoughts for years before he came in from the wilderness with his message: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!" (Matt.3:2) Jesus was no stranger to him: their mothers were cousins. John had baptised Jesus in the River Jordan only a couple of years before, and had heard the heavenly voice: "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." St. John the Evangelist in chapter 1 of his Gospel records John as saying: "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven and it remained on him." (Jn.1:32) "I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God." (34) It was John the Baptist who applied the title "Lamb of God" to Jesus. Why then this pathetic cry from prison for reassurance?

We can only speculate. But because from time to time we all may have moments of doubt - it's a well-known ploy of Satan's - it is worth-our consideration. One explanation might be that John's followers were too loyal to desert him in his time of trial, and he, suspecting that his execution was near, sent them to Jesus expecting Him to give them a clearer, forthright answer which would show them that they must now transfer their allegiance to Him. He had done it before, at Jesus' baptism, when he pointed out to Andrew and John Jesus as the Lamb of God. The other possible, equally feasible and very human explanation is this: John had been some time in prison when he sent his messengers. To a man accustomed to wandering at will, in fresh air and open spaces and the brilliant sun of the desert, life in a prison cell or dungeon must have been very traumatic. Possibly John became depressed, and as we all do when we are downhearted and have time hanging heavily on our hands, he began to worry about things. He had been proclaiming that the Messiah was imminent; he had led some of them to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was that Messiah. What if he was mistaken? Jesus was certainly not the sort of Messiah the Jews expected. Perhaps He was not really the sort of Messiah John himself had expected. So he wondered and fretted whether Jesus was in fact the Messiah. Surely if He was, He would by now

have proclaimed Himself openly! And the doubts kept crowding in. To solve them he sent to Jesus the direct question: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

What answer did Jesus give? He said to John's messengers: "Go hear and see." He does not give a straight "Yes" or "No" but points to what is happening in His ministry. Notice the oblique way in which Jesus spoke of His mighty works; He does not say that **He** is healing the blind and making the lame to walk. His repose was that *the blind receive their sight, the lame walk and the lepers are cleansed*. Jesus directly affirms that the miracles are the work of God wrought through Him. He did not answer directly; the hearer had to work it out for himself, and to make a decision of faith.

There is something of a tendency to see the miracles of Jesus as 'proof' of His divinity. This is not the way Holy Scripture sees them. They are not proofs, but signs as John the Evangelist says; signs for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. They are signs that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, - that God is present and at work in Jesus.

No doubt, Jesus replied deliberately in words that would remind the Baptist of the words of Isaiah, selected for the Old Testament reading for today: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." (Is.35:5 & 6) These are words which would help John the Baptist decide that, yes, this is the One foretold, the One who is to come. But John still had to make that decision of faith, for himself.

It is the same decision required of us, individually. We have the evidence before us of the life, works, teaching, and purpose of this man Jesus. And we are more fortunate for we have the whole story, not as John had: only a part of it and a prophecy. We know of the Incarnation of Jesus; His teaching; His revelation of God; His contact with the supernatural; His power to work miracles; His submission to death under the cruellest of conditions; His absolute sinlessness; His Resurrection; His Ascension; His sending of the Holy Spirit; and the most personal of all evidence: our own awareness of His nearness and our avid desire for His grace.

But the decision remains the same: we each as individuals have to decide whether Jesus was a good bloke with a high moral standard to proclaim, or was He - indeed, IS He the Messiah, the Son of God, God Incarnate? If we can answer "Yes", more follows. We have to show forth in our lives what we profess with our lips. We will do that according to our abilities and characteristics. But basically by showing ourselves to be one who accepts Jesus' claim that He is the Son of God; by trusting the clues to His identity in the New Testament; and by relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, by extending to others that same self-giving love and service which Christ Himself unstintingly gave. And thirdly, by heeding the call of Christ's forerunner, John the Baptist - by repentance and doing all we can to prepare the way of Christ in the wilderness of the uncaring world, as well as in our own lives.

John asked Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come?" And Jesus answered by pointing to His deeds. Jesus asks us: "Are you my disciples?" Can we answer similarly, by pointing to deeds done in His Name? If not, we'd better begin now, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. **AMEN**

On the 4th Sunday in Advent, the Sunday before Christmas Day, we have placed before us, fittingly enough, the Gospel accounts of the Annunciation of the Child to be born to Mary. The traditional Festival of the Annunciation, Lady Day, falls on March 25th – a day of particular importance to members of the Mothers' Union. As well, we have the story put before us on this Sunday prior to the celebration of the birth of that Child.

This is quite a radical departure from the lectionary of the old Book of Common Prayer, and a good one, because in the B.C.P. the whole theme of the Sundays in Advent were about John the Baptist and his message of gloom and doom unless we pull our socks up and repent. Not really a cheery introduction to the most wonderful event in the history of the world - the coming into the world of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. So the modern lectionary puts before us the Annunciation to Joseph in Advent 4, Year A of the 3-year cycle. Next year we are to think of the Annunciation to Mary, as recounted by Luke. And because there are only two accounts of the Annunciation, in Year C we have the story of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's recognition of the Child in Mary's womb. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," she sang. (Luke 1:42)

"An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said: Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." What do we know about Joseph? He figures prominently in the two narratives of the infancy of Jesus in St. Matthew's and St. Luke's Gospels, and in the episode of the 12 year-old Jesus staying behind after the visit to the Temple at Jerusalem. And that's about all. He was a descendant of King David, and a carpenter by trade. He was an upright and just man. We do not know how old he was when he became betrothed to Mary. His distress at finding her pregnant before they married was alleviated by an angelic vision: "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife."

Joseph and Mary were forced by Government edict to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register in the census of that time - no man of Joseph's calibre would make his pregnant wife undertake that journey unless under compulsion. And in Bethlehem, Jesus was born. The commonly held belief that Mary and Joseph were poverty-stricken peasants is wrong! Joseph was an artisan, a tradesman. They were in the stable because there was no room for them in the inn, not because they couldn't afford proper accommodation. Later, the wise men from the East came to visit the Infant in the house where the young child was: obviously once the census crowd had been registered and gone home, Joseph upgraded their accommodation forthwith.

Then Joseph was warned in another dream to flee with Mary and the Child to Egypt in order to escape the murderous jealousy of Herod, to whom the wise men from the East had unfortunately gone in their search for the new-born king of the Jews. Afterwards, when Herod was dead, the little family returned quietly to their home in Nazareth in the up-country province of Galilee.

The episode of the 12-year-old Jesus being lost on the way home from the Passover Festival in Jerusalem again shows Joseph as faithful in his capacity as guardian and helpmate. You remember how Jesus had become engrossed in His discussions with the teachers in the Temple. Luke tells us: "When

they saw him they were astonished, and his mother said to him: Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously." (2:48)

After this Joseph is mentioned only once by name in the New Testament Jesus had returned to Nazareth after His Baptism in the River Jordan and His temptations in the wilderness and was beginning His ministry. "And all spoke well of him and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth; and they said: Is not this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:22) It is not known when Joseph died, but clearly it was before the Crucifixion, otherwise Jesus would not have needed to give his mother into the care of His closest friend, John. These few Biblical particulars give an impression of a just, kind, dignified, and level-headed man. Self-effacing, but prompt to take necessary action.

Jesus began His ministry aged about 30. No record exists to tell us anything at all about His years from 12 until then - we presume He worked with His father in the carpenter's business. Small children were looked after by the mother; as they grew up boys were taught to share their father's work, so that in general the father governed the education of the sons while the mother that of the daughters. In addition, in Jewish households, the father acted as the family "priest", leading the family worship and religious activity, such as the prayers, the Passover ceremonial, the Friday evening Sabbath meal, and religious teaching. It would seem that Joseph fulfilled these traditional roles so well that he was the model which enabled Jesus to teach His followers to call God "Father" - "When you pray say: Our Father"

In at least two places St. Paul lays down in no uncertain terms the responsibilities of a husband and father - we don't know whether he met Joseph, but probably not. He only came into the picture after the Resurrection, and prior to that, as a Pharisee he would have had no contact with an ordinary, middle-class tradesman. Nevertheless Paul's teaching of responsible family leadership is well in keeping with the model provided by Joseph.

In his letter to the Ephesians, where he sets out the need for proper relationships within a family, Paul wrote: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband." (5:25-33) And to the Colossians: "Wives be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged." (3:18-21) Peter wrote in his First Epistle: "Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honour on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life"(3:7) What a lovely phrase that is; what a vision of ideal marriage: "Joint heirs of the grace of life." Peter and Paul were men of their time, and perhaps come through now as chauvinistic. But they were certainly promoting the need for loving relationships between husbands and wives.

Under the strident call for equality from the Women's Liberation Movement husbands by and large have resigned from headship of the family - that phrase has taken on overtones of male domination never intended by the New Testament writers. The tragic mistake made, lies not recognizing that male and female ARE equal although having differing roles. God intended male and female to be equal - as in the Creation story: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and

female he created them. (Gen.1:27) And the fifth Commandment gives equal place to father and mother: "Honour your father and your mother." (Ex.20:12)

Worst of all, men have resigned their leadership in the area of religion in many - indeed in most families. Today's image of macho man is: "real men don't go to church - that's for old women of both sexes." In fact, real men do go to church: it takes a real man to admit to being a religious person in the face of contemporary attitudes.

To be a husband and father in the style of Joseph the carpenter - just, kind, loving, dignified - is a model too often overlooked by modern man. As we come to the last few days before we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we recognise and give thanks for the one to whom God entrusted the earliest days of the temporal life of the Saviour and Redeemer of all mankind: Joseph the husband of Mary. **AMEN**

"The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity." From St. Paul's letter to Titus, chapter 2 verses 11 & 14.

A very popular tradition at Christmastime is the setting up of a representation of the stable and its inhabitants of the first Christmas. And we see them, not only in churches where you would expect them to be, but also in shop windows, shopping malls, and people's front gardens. It is following a custom originated in about 1220AD by St. Francis of Assisi. These cribs are of course very stylized and unreal, even inaccurate representations, but they serve as visual aids - a focus for a reminder of the true meaning of this time.

A small boy, who had been told that Baby Jesus was the Son of God, is alleged to have looked long and hard at one such Crib, and at length looked up at his mother and said: "But Mummy, where's God?" Well, we can't very well include an image of God, because it's just not possible to portray Him in any real and worthy way. Sometimes, but not always, there is the traditional image of an angel, to suggest the supernatural aspect of the event.

The little boy's question might occur to thoughtful people at this time as they are faced by all the secular, non-religious celebrations carried out with great fervour during December. All the commercialisation - "Where's God in all this? What has this got to do with the birth of the Messiah, the Christ?" And the answer is: "Nothing at all for those who leave Christ out of Christmas."

For Christmas is a religious festival. We might wonder what the non-religious are celebrating. And they seem to celebrate more fervently than so-called religious people! What we are celebrating is summed up in the message of the angel to the shepherds, recounted in the Gospel passage appointed for today: "To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

"In many and various ways, God spoke of old to our forefathers by the prophets: but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature." So begins the Epistle to the Hebrews. Often when people try to explain their insights into the Being of God, their explanations turn out to be so involved and confusing, that most of us are left floundering and even wondering what we are supposed to believe! To most ordinary people God is frequently most clearly revealed in some aspect of His Creation, or at a time of birth or death, or in some dawning light in our understanding. The birth of Jesus is a simple story, so simple that anyone can grasp the essentials, and little children can act it out in Nativity plays. Yet through it, God spoke to all who would hear, and the truths which lie behind it are so profound and full of holy mystery, that the would-be explainers get into confusing complexity. This great act of God, so simple and ordinary and every-day as the birth of a child, turns out to be as complex and difficult to understand as the intermingling of the genes which make every child a different person from any other child. It is better then, for us to look for God in His acts, rather than in trying to find Him in the explanations of theologians. We are called to worship God - not to understand His Being.

So what then do we see God doing, and hear God saying, in this act of the Incarnation which we commemorate at this time? The word "Incarnation" means literally "entering into flesh; becoming a living embodiment". But such a definition is not nearly adequate to explain the mystery of mankind's redemption, his being brought home to God. St. John used the term "The Word" with reference to the Incarnation, to try to make clear what God was doing. He wrote: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth." (1:14)

A word is an expression; The Word, with a capital W, is the expression of God in human terms, as He expressed Himself at the beginning of time when the Universe was created. The Babe of Bethlehem is the means of expression for the mighty Being who controls the stars and designs the minute perfection of the tiniest insect. In the Babe God has entered into His own creation. He has become the personal element in the being of one of His own subjects. He reveals Himself, as far as such revelation is possible, through the nature, the human nature, of the Child as He grows and develops into full manhood - any other revelation of Himself to mankind would be beyond our comprehension. Knowledge of the Incarnation does not comprise the whole of the Christian message though. God at this time gave His only-begotten Son to be born of a pure virgin, and as we recognise that we are reminded that our destiny as Christian men and women is that we are to become His children, by adoption and grace. In the Collect, or special prayer for Christmas Day we pray that, being born again and made God's children, we may be renewed daily by the Holy Spirit. Our new birth, our new beginning of life in the Spirit, means, paradoxically, that Christ is born again in US, and lives in US! And right here is where that historic occasion becomes an ever-present reality: where we may become swept up and united with Christ - the Word uniting Himself with our personality, strengthening our individuality, giving us the opportunity to be as He is. As the Son of God, descending from heaven and becoming incarnate, spoke to humanity through the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, so we are to show the character of Jesus in our own thoughts and actions and words. As God expressed Himself in Jesus, so Jesus would express Himself in us and through us. That is what we mean when we sing:

"O Holy Child of Bethlehem Descend to us we pray; Cast out our sin, and enter in – Be born in us today."

The trouble is, that simple as it sounds, the task of allowing the Christ within us to control our every action is beyond us. It is an easy lesson, hard to learn, and harder to put into practice. We have no difficulty in understanding what it says, but enormous difficulty in remembering and acting upon it at the appropriate moment. It sounds so simple just to act as Jesus would at any given moment. Yet we know that, over and over again, our own human frailty intervenes and defeats our better intentions. As we celebrate the Incarnation, we pray that we may daily be renewed: to keep our wavering minds and consciences fresh and active requires constant invigoration. Jesus was fully aware of this aspect of human psychology, and for that reason promised the never-failing, assistance of the Holy Spirit. Being daily renewed by the Holy Spirit, we may more readily be reminded of His presence within us, and of His desire to express Himself through us. He who was born in the stable at Bethlehem, the eternal Word of God, may in a very real sense, be born again in our hearts. All the tenderness and strength, the peace and goodwill, the love and affection, which stem from Him, are aroused in us and awakened to

expression by the influence of His Spirit upon our hearts and minds and very being. It is in our unity with Him that all He has revealed of God and His ways come alive.

May God bless you and your loved ones at this Christmas-tide, and may He indeed be born anew in you.

AMEN

THE SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY 26th December, 2010

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

There is something remarkable about Christmas - something that prevents it from becoming stale and hackneyed, even though the same story is repeated year after year, and the same, generally trite, carols are sung over and over again. Of course to the blasé it is just a bore, but to the Christian it is the renewal of a proclamation of hope for a world which is often anxious and weary.

During those few hectic weeks before December 25th, when there is not sufficient time to fit in all the things that just must be done, and not enough cash to buy all the things we must buy, most people find themselves wondering if it really is all worth while. Partly this is of course self-inflicted! Many do rather go overboard in their efforts to ensure that the Festival is celebrated "worthily", and most people eat too much and drink too much because that is the way we have been taught to celebrate Christmas. Then, suddenly, after a last minute, frantic dashing about, the Festival is upon us. It usually creeps up before we are quite ready. We go to church, either on Christmas Eve or on Christmas morning. We open our parcels, becoming knee-deep in wrapping paper if the family includes children, or for older folk, if the extended family has come home. There is the traditionally huge meal, some sitting around chatting, and for some even dozing, and that seems to have been Christmas for another year.

And yet, as we look back, that one hour in church was really the pivot of the whole business, wasn't it? So peaceful after all the stress and panic. So moving to hear again the familiar story of the Incarnation and to sing those wonderful words of the Christmas hymns. Surely as we compare the time spent celebrating Christmas that hour shines out, if we are thinking people, as the best part, the most meaningful part. As we compare, it makes some of our other celebration seem rather hollow and even shabby.

Well of course it should, for here is the very heart of the Festival All the rest are just the trimmings with which we have surrounded it. And many people get lost in the trimmings and mistake them for the real thing. Satan is very crafty. He cannot deny or argue against the fact of the Incarnation. But he can and does cloud with tinsel and imitation snow and Father Christmas and postcards.. He can persuade us that we must celebrate Christmas in the time-honoured way - which gives us an excuse to indulge in a little bit of gluttony.

Probably more people attend the Christmas Eucharist less prepared than at any other time. Take a Christmas Eve service. Late closing of the shops if it's a weeknight; all kinds of activities going on in the town centre; perhaps a party from which people might go directly to church. Or there might be last-minute parcels to be wrapped to go under the Tree. No harm in any of them, but not good pre-communion preparation. Similarly on Christmas morning. The parcels to be discovered in stockings or under the Christmas Tree and unwrapped, especially if there are youngsters. Housewives tend to be rather concerned about getting the poultry on in time. And so it goes on. All understandable, but none of it preparation for Holy Communion, and least of all for Holy Communion on one of the foremost days of the year.

Considering all these distractions, it is all the more remarkable that the numbers at church at Christmas are always higher than usual. That must be qualified for those tiny congregations where it depends upon who has gone away for Christmas and who has family come home. But despite all our preoccupation we do give the service high priority. And there we find an oasis of peace in all the hustle and bustle. We know that the reality of Christmas lies here. However messed-up the world may be; however torn with strife and warfare; whether we are living in such prosperous conditions that we have become thoughtless of the needs of others: we are reminded that Christ came, and comes to us. There is always anxiety in the world, and strain and worry. Christmas provides hope for our troubled world, at every level of human affairs. In the powerful first chapter of St. John's Gospel where he speaks of the Incarnation, he wrote "To all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God." And that declaration is just as true, valid, and pertinent for Christians in our modern world as it ever was.

Not that the world's problems have been eliminated since John wrote those words, but that through the eyes of faith we see realities which the world does not take into account. Not that the Christian retreats from the difficulties and anguish of life into a rose-tinted land of fantasy, but rather that he sees life in a broader, more balanced perspective. In other words, Christmas does not mean an escape from the world's problems, but rather a reversal of the world's scheme of values, whereby all sorts of possibilities can and do occur. Therefore we are able to see purpose and meaning for life, in spite of the unsolved problems with which we must continue to live.

If our celebration of Christmas is more than merely the observance of a traditional season of festivity, it is surely because we are convinced and again reminded that the love of God has the last word to say in human affairs. This love of God is not just an abstract principle; but an actual force working through men and women in their normal contacts with each other to change for good the state of families, businesses, committees, communities, and nations. Here is the power to become the children of God - the only hope that can really overcome the world's anxiety.

It is most fitting that the highest point in our religious expression of Christmas is when we move forward to the altar rail and reach out our hands to receive the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. We receive Him into our hearts and very being; it is as if He is born again in us. But we do not remain long there at the altar rail, or even in church. We soon go back to our homes; in a day or so back to work and everyday routine. Our Christmas hope is that the Lord Christ will go with us so that we can be used in some measure to heal the world's anxiety on every level where we have contact with men and women and their concerns.

Almost immediately after Christmas we move into the New Year. On New Year's Day we are still the same people - nothing has changed except the date. But the New Year seems to suggest a new start, with fresh opportunities, a leaving behind of the mistakes of last year. We must remember the greatness of God's love and His forgiveness as we take up the new challenges. We know that we can go forward into this New Year with the peace and purpose and power of Christ going with us through the days to come.

"To all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God."
Let us receive Him; let us accept and see that power He offers, and become truly children of God. **AMEN**